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Theology for Freedom and Responsibility: Rudolf Bultmann's Views on Church and State By Antje Bultmann Lemke, Syracuse University	3
Albert Schweitzer and His Nuclear Concerns Seen Today By Rhena Schweitzer Miller	17
The Albert Schweitzer Papers at Syracuse University By Ursula Berkling	27
Clothing of Wrought Gold, Raiment of Needlework: Embroidered Chasubles in the Syracuse University Art Collections By Susan Kyser, Syracuse University Art Collections	41
Common Cause: The Antislavery Alliance of Gerrit Smith and Beriah Green By Milton C. Sernett, Associate Professor, Department of Afro-American Studies, Syracuse University	55
My First Book— <i>Treasure Island</i> By Robert Louis Stevenson	77
News of the Syracuse University Libraries and the Library Associates	89

Clothing of Wrought Gold, Raiment of Needlework: Embroidered Chasubles in the Syracuse University Art Collections

BY SUSAN KYSER

Syracuse University has the good fortune to possess a beautiful and unusual collection of embroidered liturgical textiles made in southern Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Donated to the University in 1950 by George Arents, the collection contains more than one hundred items, including vestments such as chasubles, stoles, and maniples, as well as chalice covers, altar and lectern covers, and other embroidered panels once used to decorate vestments.

Outstanding among the liturgical textiles are the chasubles, which show a uniformly high quality of execution and preservation. A chasuble is the outermost garment worn by a priest celebrating Mass and, as the most visible of the liturgical vestments, traditionally carries elaborate and religiously symbolic ornamentation. There are ten chasubles in the Arents donation, eight of which are complete; the remaining two consist only of the back panel, which typically receives far less wear than the front. The extreme care and enormous amount of work lavished on every piece complement the often precious materials from which they were created: silks, and metallic threads of gold and silver. Indeed, the technical complexity and expert execution of this needlework suggest the art of professional embroiderers.

It may well have been the beauty of this workmanship that attracted the collector, Mrs. George (Annie Walters) Arents, Sr.¹ to

1. This idea was suggested to me by Mrs. Julianne Oldfield, to whom I am also indebted for much encouragement and support at the inception of this project. Syracuse University owes another of its treasures to Mrs. Arents's interest in collecting: the Annie Walters Arents collection of nineteenth-century European academic paintings, donated by her son, George Arents, in 1949.



Fig. 1. En route from Cordoba to Sevilla—"Enjoying our troubles", from the George Arents album of photographs entitled "Wanderings in Spain and Portugal".



Fig. 2. The George Arents family at lunch on one of their trips (either 1905 or 1909), from "Wanderings in Spain and Portugal".

these embroideries. We know little of their collection history beyond the observation that the textiles appear to have been acquired from churches in Spain, Portugal, and Italy during the early part of this century. No collection records have been located, and as of now the only evidence for their provenance is, unfortunately, rather circumstantial: a photograph album compiled by George Arents entitled "Wanderings in Spain and Portugal"² (figs. 1 and 2) which documents two such family trips in 1905 and 1909. Prominent among its roadside scenes and architectural views are religious monuments and monastic institutions. However, without further information the provenance of individual pieces remains somewhat speculative. Attributions must be based upon the shapes of the vestments, which show certain national variations, and upon pattern designs, which also reflect national preferences. Stitching techniques tend to be a less reliable indicator of provenance since the basic vocabulary of materials and techniques in this kind of embroidery was common throughout the western European countries.

2. Located in the rare book division of the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University.

Distinguished by design, materials, and technique, professional embroidery is quite different from the popular or peasant embroidery of these countries, much of which is famous in its own right. Professional embroidery makes use of rich and sumptuous materials, employs a variety of complex needlework techniques within each piece, and represents the work of several hands. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ecclesiastical embroideries were occasionally made and donated to the church by aristocratic ladies, but more often were commissioned from workers who had been trained in the art of embroidery. Large cathedrals throughout southern Europe supported entire workshops of these highly skilled artisans, both men and women. Trained embroiderers were also to be found within convents and monasteries, where they produced great numbers of elaborately worked vestments. Designs for these embroideries may have been furnished by painters but were also taken from the increasingly popular pattern books published in most European countries in the eighteenth century. Liturgical arts were in no way immune to secular fashions: produced for patrons who were desirous of imitating styles favored at the French court, eighteenth-century liturgical embroideries, like all professionally produced needlework, reflected prevailing fashions of the time.

The majority of the Syracuse chasubles are typical examples of Baroque ecclesiastical arts from southern Europe. Symmetrical, crowded designs articulated by sweeping curves or volutes, fantastic floral patterns unified by swirling leaves and stems, and an exuberant, often unrestrained use of color characterize the entire group. Most of the patterns are based on floral forms, although some are built on a scrolling structure with flowers added as embellishment. Foliage and flowers are strongly naturalistic, yet are more often products of the imagination than copies of botanical specimens. A few familiar blossoms such as roses and carnations have liturgical associations, but for the most part the designs remain secular. Conceived as a complement to the Baroque interiors in which they were used, the chasubles possess a surface pattern that is visually overabundant. Ornate, heavily textured, and glittering with silk, gold, and polychromed sequins, these vestments represent an expression in textile media of the same impulses that produced the vigorous and movemented architecture of the Baroque era.

One of the few chasubles here to make explicit use of religious



Fig. 3. SU 50.111, front of chasuble (dimensions: 45 x 26 inches). Spain, mid-eighteenth century (Photo: David Broda).

symbolism is SU 50.110/111, a Spanish vestment probably dating from the mid-eighteenth century (fig. 3). On the front a brilliant blue aureole radiates from the monogram IHS, which is surmounted by a moline cross and placed above a representation of the Sacred Heart ringed with the Crown of Thorns. Outside of this emblem images of palm trees and large fantastic blossoms fill the remaining spaces and float on a glittering ground of gold, which is worked to resemble woven cloth. The plain linen foundation fabric is entirely covered with needlework. For the background, gilt metal thread was couched, or attached to the surface of the linen by nearly invisible stitches of silk, worked from the back and placed in a particular geometric pattern. To create the effect of a woven fabric, the embroiderers used a couching pattern that resembles brickwork, cords stitched to the linen ground to give a low relief to the brickwork pattern, and alternation of groups of flat metal threads with groups of round metal threads.³

In shape this vestment is characteristic of Spanish chasubles in the eighteenth century. It has been trimmed in front, perhaps as much as five inches on either side, most noticeably near the top where the ends of the rays are covered by the added trim that edges the vestment. In this regard, SU 50.110/111 is a typical example of the Spanish 'fiddle-back' style, so named because the front panel, which narrows at the shoulders and flares towards the hem, was said by its detractors to resemble the shape of a violin case.⁴

Distinct national styles for chasubles were known since the sixteenth century in western Europe, and had resulted from the gradual narrowing of the vestment. In moving away from its bell-shaped me-

3. The great variety of needlework techniques used in this chasuble, particularly the low-relief metallic embroidery, are explained in Charles Germain de Saint-Aubin, *Art of the Embroiderer* (1770), trans. Nikki Scheuer (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in association with David R. Godine, publisher, Boston, 1983), which discusses techniques practiced by professional embroiderers in France during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. The Syracuse chasuble also resembles a problematic group of vestments coming from Bavaria and Mexico signalled by Christa Mayer-Thurman in *Raiment for the Lord's Service: A Thousand Years of Western Vestments* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1975), Nos. 78, 101, 131, and 141.

4. See Rev. Edward J. Sutfin, "The Chasuble in the Roman Rite", *Liturgical Arts* 24 (August 1956): 76–104.

dieval form, the chasuble had been trimmed at the sides to allow greater freedom of movement in the liturgical celebration, particularly important when the vestment was made of heavy brocades trimmed with gold needlework. The process was a gradual one, and by the Baroque era the character of the chasuble had been transformed from that of an enveloping garment to that of a pair of stiffened panels attached at the shoulders. Older chasubles were trimmed at the upper sides, especially in front, and most chasubles that remained in use through this period show signs of having been altered. Four national styles are usually distinguished—Italian, Spanish, French, and German—each with slightly different sizes and proportions. The chasubles of Spain were most drastically diminished in size, while those of Italy remained generally wider and longer than the others.

Also typical of eighteenth-century chasubles is the decorative scheme of SU 50.110/111. The visual division of the panel into three vertical segments by two thin bands of interlocking leaf shapes is all that remains of the traditional orphrey band.⁵ During the latter part of the seventeenth century, in conjunction with the flowering of the Baroque era, the orphrey lost its importance as the visual focus of the chasuble, and embroidered decoration spread over the entire surface of the vestment. Orphreys were almost always retained in outline form, however, sometimes giving a basic structure to the design, and at other times simply adding another decorative element to a crowded composition. Orphrey shapes also reflect national styles. The Spanish chasuble had pillar orphreys, or plain columns, in front and in back, while the Italian chasuble had a pillar orphrey in back and an orphrey cross in front. The various types of chasubles were not confined to or exclusively used in the country for which they were named, but the styles did predominate in their countries of origin.

Another chasuble, SU 50.115/116, is also of the Spanish style, although it may actually be Portuguese in origin since the type of orientalized design it carries had such lasting influence in that country (fig. 4). Here, Chinese motifs and color schemes are arranged in a composition distinctly reminiscent of the embroidered *pintados*, or

5. Orphreys, from the Latin *aurifrisium*, originally referred to Phrygian goldwork. These are the decorative bands, usually embroidered, applied in a prescribed or traditional manner to liturgical vestments.



Fig. 4. SU 50.116, back of chasuble, detail (area shown: 20 x 25 inches).
Portugal, eighteenth century (Photo: David Broda).

bed-coverings, imported from India into Europe in great numbers beginning in the fifteenth century.⁶ From that time Portuguese art and architecture were strongly affected by goods and ideas brought by traders returning from India and the Far East.

Worked entirely in colored silks on a cream-colored silk ground, SU 50.115/116 shows cloud-like peonies, wide-beaked birds, and butterflies with long tails and curving antennae, all unified by delicately scrolling vines and tendrils. The scale is relatively small, and the stitching minute and precise. Pillar orphreys are marked by borders similar to those that outline the sides and neckline of the chasuble. The upper part has been trimmed in front but retains the original border, which was hemmed on the inner edge where the alteration took place. The neckline border has also been rearranged.

In spite of the evident fading of the colors on this chasuble, a

6. See John Irwin, "Origins of the 'Oriental Style' in English Decorative Art", *Burlington Magazine* 97 (April 1955): 106–114. See also John Irwin and Margaret Hall, *Indian Embroideries* (Ahmedabad: Calico Museum, 1973), Chapter II, "Trade Embroideries of the 17th and 18th Centuries".

Chinese influence can be found in its use of a graded spectrum of colors, placed in the design in discrete bands. Adjacent colors are separated by a tiny line of the white of the background silk, a detail that imitates the block-printed designs of Indian chintz. The design is very closely related to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English crewelwork embroideries modelled on Indian chintz patterns; yet it would never be mistaken for an English embroidery. The particular stylization of the birds is one that never seems to have appealed to the English imagination, for example; and the design has none of the folk charm or playfulness of contemporary English chinoiserie. Instead, it seems to be a more somber rendition of exotic motifs in which the elements are employed for their ability to impress rather than their ability to express.

Orientalized elements of a very different kind occur on SU 50.36/51, which portrays a pair of crested, long-necked birds that makes it one of the favorites in the collection (fig. 5). This chasuble has a dark red silk ground embroidered with polychrome silks in golden browns, yellows, and creams, and two types of metallic thread worked in a variety of patterns. Symmetrical volutes and C-scrolls form the basis of the design, while delicate stems with small blossoms and leaves of several shapes are scattered in the interstices. Raised metallic embroidery is used in 'commas' that edge the silk curves to enhance the illusion of solidity and emphasize the swirl and turn of the composition line. Almost lost among the heavy swirls of this late Baroque design, the exotic birds hold delicate stems of white-tipped lavender flowers in their upturned beaks. Superior materials and expert execution seem to place the origin of this chasuble in Italy or France in the mid-eighteenth century.⁷

Needlework techniques rarely signal national origins, but may confirm an attribution made on other grounds. One distinctive type of embroidery popular in Portugal for bed-coverings and also used a great deal in Italy is a particular laid-and-couched silk technique that

7. The cut of SU 50.36/51 is somewhat non-standard, presenting a hybrid of the Spanish and Italian types; in shape it is Spanish, with front and back of approximately equal size, and joinings of the two parts at the shoulders. However, the orphreys are Italian, with a pillar orphrey in back having a V at the neckline that becomes the upper part of the orphrey cross in front. Italian chasubles usually are divided into two parts of unequal size, the back being larger, and joined along the upper horizontal line of the orphrey cross in front.



Fig. 5. SU 50.36, front of chasuble, detail (area shown: 15 x 10 inches). Southern Europe, mid-eighteenth century (Photo: David Broda).

derives from imported oriental embroideries. In this technique a foundation fabric is entirely covered with couched silkwork: silk floss (untwisted strands) is laid on the surface and held in place by a set of finer, twisted silk threads placed at right angles to the first, and fastened by tiny stitches taken from the back of the foundation fabric. This produces a showy but not terribly durable fabric, which by retaining most of the silk on the surface takes advantage of its high luster. Two of the Syracuse chasubles employ this technique.⁸ In SU 50.108/109 a standard Baroque pattern of large loops facing alternating directions is infused with an exuberant and overabundant quality that seems to belong to folk or rural arts rather than to court-oriented traditions (fig. 6). Here, large scrolling floral vines shelter perched birds and burst into great pink and yellow blossoms. The quality of work on this chasuble is somewhat coarse, the stitches large and not so carefully executed as one might expect. However, the exuberance of pattern and color give this chasuble an expressive vitality not found in the others. SU 50.108/109 could have come from Spain, Portugal, or Italy, and probably belongs to the late seventeenth century.⁹

Two outstanding Italian chasubles are worked entirely in metals upon a red silk ground. One, SU 50.23, shows a late seventeenth-century design that comes close to being an overall pattern: a tangle of gold vines spotted with large, fantastic silver blossoms in a great variety of fanciful shapes (fig. 7). The other, SU 50.75, remarkable for the sheer richness of its deep red and gold color, is at once ornate and sober (fig. 8). Its design belongs to the classical revival of the latter part of the eighteenth century but still bears marks of the Rococo: lopsided C-curves hold pedestalled vases of tiny flowers, and borders and orphreys are trimmed with a geometric meander pattern. The quality of work on this piece is exquisite: the metallic threads are extremely fine and the couching patterns minute and precise.

With historic textiles in particular, a collection history necessarily

8. One is SU 50.25/38, probably Portuguese, which contains polychrome silkwork entirely stitched in the laid-and-couched technique, as well as some metallic embroidery. The other, SU 50.108/109, has only the background worked in laid-and-couched silk, while the floral design is executed in satin stitch embellished with raised work in metallic threads.

9. SU 50.108/109 is very close to Mayer-Thurman No. 77, from Italy, second half of the seventeenth century.



Fig. 6. SU 50.109, back of chasuble, detail (area shown: 20 x 16 inches). Southern Europe, late seventeenth century (Photo: David Broda).

deals with why the objects have survived at all, since use and extreme fragility of the materials as well as changing fashions combine to make most textiles disappear over the centuries. The very survival of pieces such as these testifies to the great care with which they have been treated. Unlike more durable media such as metal, stone,



Fig. 7. SU 50.23, back of chasuble, detail (area shown: 17 x 21 inches). Italy, late seventeenth century (Photo: David Broda).

and even wood, European textiles survive most often because they were treasured and cared for, not because they were forgotten or overlooked. A continuing high regard for liturgical objects in the Catholic cultures which produced them and the care they have received for nearly a century in America have made it possible for us today to glimpse into the world of their creation. They are products of a craft tradition whose skills were gained over the course of generations and belong to a culture which held the liturgical celebration at the center of life. What may seem to us an excessive amount of painstaking work was, no doubt, for its creators a kind of devotion. The finest skills and materials available at the time went into the making of these vestments, which were intended to adorn the liturgical celebrant in the most splendid manner possible. Taken out of their liturgical context, these textiles still speak of a world in which the value of objects directly related to the skill, the time, and the precious materials invested in their creation.

The chasubles represent just a fraction of the Arents donation of liturgical textiles in the Syracuse University Art Collections. This is indeed an unusual resource, of interest to students of textile history and design, decorative arts in southern Europe, ecclesiastical dress,



Fig. 8. SU 50.75, back of chasuble detail (area shown: 30 x 23 inches). Italy, second half of the eighteenth century (Photo: David Broda).

and ecclesiastical embroidery. The true richness and vitality of design, and the manner in which choice of materials, technique, color, and pattern combine to produce a coherent statement in these vestments is something that can be appreciated only from the objects themselves. For this opportunity we at Syracuse University are greatly indebted to the Arents family.